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**The Real McCloy: Fiction, History, and the Real in Zoë Wicomb's "The One That Got Away"**

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## The Real McCloy: Fiction, History, and the Real in Zoë Wicomb's "The One That Got Away"

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the intertextual connections between Zoë Wicomb's 2008 short story, "The One That Got Away," and Helen McCloy's 1945 novel, *The One That Got Away*, a piece of detective fiction used by Wicomb's main character as the basis for a work of contemporary art. Drawing concepts from Wicomb's 2005 essay on setting and intertextuality, I argue that Wicomb creatively interacts with McCloy's novel to explore issues of authorial ethics, historical representation, and ideological critique. At the heart of both works is a series of triangular relationships between readers, texts, and their corporeal authors that foreground acts of resistant reading and creative reframing. Familiarity with McCloy's novel reveals new forms of reference and commentary at work in Wicomb's story.<sup>1</sup>

In the title story of Zoë Wicomb's 2008 collection, *The One That Got Away*, Drew Brown, a "coloured" South African artist, finds a circulating library book, a mystery novel entitled *The One That Got Away*, mis-shelved in the Cape Town City Library among books on the history of gold mining in South Africa. During a honeymoon trip to Scotland, Drew undertakes a personal quest to return the book to its "home" in the Dennistoun Public Library in Glasgow, but not before turning the physical book into a palimpsestic work of visual art, painting the spine and adding a second title page. "Like any traveller then," thinks Drew, "the book will return, showing the scars of its journey, . . . flaunting its history and its difference" (46). The published criticism that has begun to emerge on this story has addressed numerous topics, including Wicomb's use of postmodern literary techniques, her critique of cosmopolitanism, and her portrayal of the ambiguities of archival research.<sup>2</sup> What no critic has so far noticed or acknowledged, however, is that the book Wicomb chooses as the object of Drew's artistic project, Helen McCloy's *The One That Got Away*, is in fact a real mystery novel, set in the Scottish Highlands and published in 1945, by an American woman who is fairly well known in the field of mystery and detective fiction. When they have mentioned the book at all, critics have tended to view it as a mere object devoid of any relevant content, a blank canvas for Drew's

artistic vision, not as a complex work of art in its own right. In this they have followed the example set by Drew himself, who, we are told, “flicked through the book and gathered that it was a mystery set in the Scottish Highlands. Not his kind of thing, but it was the object and its history rather than the text that interested him” (45). It would seem that the critics have assumed either that the McCloy book is a fictional novel invented by Wicomb to serve her purposes in this story, or that, as a representative of the low-status genre of the mystery novel, it is “not their kind of thing.”

This critical silence is especially surprising since the library book is the central symbol in Wicomb’s story. As both catalyst and raw material for Drew’s art, it connects to the story’s theme of art as a process of refashioning and recontextualizing and provides a means for the story’s metafictional reflections on Wicomb’s own artistic activity. Wicomb’s story begins, after all, with a mystery. “Drew has kept mum,” its first sentence declares (37). About what? And why? Answers emerge only gradually as Drew’s secrecy about his project finds its counterpart in Wicomb’s narrative strategy of selective revelation. That Wicomb has not invented the book but appropriated an existing novel opens a further set of intertextual mysteries: Why this author and this novel? How is the content of McCloy’s novel connected to that of Wicomb’s postcolonial story, in which it is now embedded? And how is intertextuality as a strategy inseparable from Wicomb’s larger goals and themes? In this essay I propose to explore the complex intertextual relations between these two works and their implications for what Dorothy Driver has called the “double aesthetic and political direction” of Wicomb’s work (“Struggle” 523).<sup>3</sup>

#### SETTING THE SCENE

Wicomb’s 2005 essay, “Setting, Intertextuality, and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author,” gives us some indication of the theoretical basis for her intertextual practice in 2008.

Wicomb begins the essay by arguing that the role of setting in fiction—the description of places in which characters move and act—goes beyond the promotion of verisimilitude or the elaboration of character. “Setting is the representation of physical surroundings that is crucially bound up with a culture and its dominant ideologies, providing ready-made, recognizable meanings. In other words, setting functions much like intertextuality” (146). In both, she argues, a character or text is placed in surroundings whose details carry ideological weight. Thus, when there is an ironic tension between a character or a cited text and its context, we see a version of the clash between dominant and resistant ideologies and the reader is exposed to “meanings that destabilize received views” (146). Wicomb stresses the transformative effects of such irony in postcolonial writing. Putting texts of different cultures or positions in dialogue with one another, she writes, “brings into being the interconnectedness of the human world in a divided society” (146). The writer’s freedom to cite and question other writers’ works, however, must extend to each writer’s own readers. Invoking “the reader’s physical engagement with the book,” she argues, is a way of asserting the reader’s freedom to handle, interpret, and “recycle” the book, both as an object and at the level of ideas, thus removing the author from the “theological” position of presiding deity (150-151).

Wicomb illustrates her argument with examples from the fiction of Faulkner, Coetzee, Rushdie, Morrison, and others, thus making her essay practice the intertextual embedding it discusses. The centerpiece of the essay, however, is an extended reading of fellow South African writer Ivan Vladislavic’s story “Kidnapped” and its engagement with Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel of the same title. In Vladislavic’s use of Stevenson, Wicomb argues, intertextuality becomes a postcolonial strategy for both asserting and challenging a filial relation with the imperial center. It also sets up a “symbiotic rather than . . . hierarchical relationship” between

reader and author by positioning both as fellow readers of earlier texts (150). Furthermore, Vladislavic's nested series of self-references deliberately blurs the "canonical distinction between author and narrator" (149). Wicomb finds a similarly "intimate" relationship between author, narrator, and reader in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. By insisting on the author's corporeality through the use of spatial and temporal deixis, Wicomb argues, Morrison foregrounds her own subjectivity and thus her commitment to "an ethics of authorial responsibility" (150) that involves making oneself accountable for both the content and the representational modes of one's work.

Wicomb concludes her essay with a further consideration of deixis, the use of words and phrases whose meaning depends on knowledge of the context or circumstances of the utterance.<sup>4</sup> Pronouns such as "I," "you," "here," and "now" have no fixed meanings but direct the interpreter to the specific persons, places, and time (i.e. to the setting) involved in the communicative act. Deixis highlights at once both the indeterminacy of meaning in language and the reality of a world outside the text. Wicomb connects linguistic deixis to the concept of proprioceptivity, the subject's sense of an "imagined spatial envelope" to which deictic references like "here," "there," and "my" are keyed (152). This spatial envelope extends first of all to the skin, and then to the subject's physical and cultural surroundings. Wicomb's essay thus draws three concepts into the same field of analysis: the displaced or "kidnapped" text of intertextuality, the subject (whether fictional character or real person) in her envelope of skin, and the displaced author in foreign physical and cultural surroundings. "If the foreigner is marked by her visual salience and the natives' focus on her difference," Wicomb writes, "the imagined envelope of space will not fit her snugly; she will necessarily have difficulty in setting her fictions in that space or in pressing her characters into ill-fitting envelopes that would render them posturally disfigured"

(152). There is an implicit and unresolved irony here, however: whereas the displaced text is seen as a fertile source of creativity and meaning, the displaced author feels her creativity stifled in foreign surroundings.

In Wicomb's use of Helen McCloy's novel, we can see several elements of her 2005 essay at work. Just as Vladislavic had borrowed Stevenson's Scottish novel, title and all, for his story, "Kidnapped," Wicomb kidnaps McCloy's Scottish novel for both the substance and the title of her story (and uses it as the title of the entire story collection).<sup>5</sup> Although, as mentioned above, Drew shows little interest in the contents of McCloy's book, his handling and modification of it as a physical object signify his freedom as a reader to intervene in the construction of meaning. Wicomb, however, has clearly read McCloy's novel and interacts with its contents in quite intricate ways, as I will show. The story thus stages two readings of the novel—Drew's and Wicomb's—from two different subject positions. Although Wicomb is ultimately in control of both, so that hers is a kind of envelope or sleeve containing his, her final gesture in the story is to make Drew a resisting reader of her story, one who is not entirely happy with the way he has been represented. This can be read as a confession of partial failure on Wicomb's part that reinforces her ethical stance.

#### A WOMAN OF MYSTERY

So who is the real McCloy and how is her work relevant to this story? Born into a literary family in New York in 1904, Helen McCloy wrote over thirty novels between 1938 and 1980, thirteen of them in a series featuring the psychiatrist-detective Dr. Basil Willing. Between the two world wars McCloy studied in France at the Sorbonne and worked as a journalist and art critic.<sup>6</sup> In 1946 she married Davis Dresser, author of the Mike Shayne mystery series under the pseudonym Brett Halliday, and with him founded the Torquil Publishing Company, drawing the

name from her father's Scottish ancestry. In 1950 McCloy became the first woman to serve as president of the Mystery Writers of America and in 1954 received from them the Edgar Award for mystery criticism. She was named an MWA Grand Master in 1990, four years before her death in 1994, and retains a position of honor via the Helen McCloy Scholarships offered each year by the MWA.<sup>7</sup> As this brief sketch indicates, McCloy's range of interests, including visual art, psychology, history, literature, feminism, and Scotland, is remarkably similar to that of Wicomb herself. Within the realm of mystery and suspense fiction McCloy was highly skilled and highly regarded. She also claimed, however, that generic biases kept such work in the status of "stepchild" in relation to "serious" literature. In a brief 1955 essay in *The New Republic*, she wrote, "At present, as far as literary quality goes, the best of the suspense novels are on the same plane as the best of the straight novels" and complained of "the rigid caste system of the book trade" that kept her and writers like her marginalized ("Whodunits" 29). Wicomb's citation of her can thus be seen, in one of its aspects, as a resurrection of a pioneering but forgotten genre figure, a resurrection that has gone unnoticed, in part, because the generic "caste system" of which McCloy wrote is still in force. The fact that McCloy was also a respected female author adds an element of maternal homage to Wicomb's gesture.

It is fitting, in this light, that the novel Wicomb has chosen as a source-text for her intertextual artistry takes both motherhood and authorship as central themes. Writing in 1945, McCloy uses the detective story framework to critique fascism as a direct assault on women in general and on maternal influence in particular. The main plot concerns the search by American military intelligence for an escaped German prisoner of war, a boy of fifteen who had been removed from his family at age seven and raised, according to the tenets of the Hitler Youth Movement, to revere manly courage and violence. The boy's brutal murders of two men leave

clues that lead to his capture and expose his Nazi ideology, with its disparagement of women and the non-Aryan races, as bankrupt.<sup>8</sup> The novel also traces key elements of this Nazi ideology to the writings of a fictional American philosopher named Hugo Blaine, who, in the novel's climactic confrontation, is held accountable for his works in a most gruesome fashion.

To prepare for this climax, McCloy structures the novel as a series of direct encounters between readers and the authors of books they have read. In the opening scene, Peter Dunbar, the first-person narrator and an American intelligence officer, travels to the fictional city of Dalriada in the Scottish Highlands in the final year of the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> On the way he meets a Scottish aristocrat, Lord Ness, who recognizes his name as the author of "several books on the psychology of juvenile delinquents" (8). Ness had been researching the topic because the adopted son of renters on his estate, Eric and Frances Stockton, has repeatedly run away for no apparent reason. With an expert in the field before him, Ness asks his advice and his help. When they get to Ness's estate, where Dunbar has taken lodgings to carry out a secret mission of his own, Dunbar meets Johnny Stockton, the youth in his mid-teens who has been running away, and learns that he is actually Eric Stockton's nephew. He was adopted into their family after his real parents were killed in Hong Kong and after he was nearly killed in an air raid in Dalriada. Dunbar agrees to observe the Stockton household to try to determine the cause of Johnny's strange behavior.

Authorship and genre arise here, too, for both Eric and Frances Stockton are novelists whose works Dunbar has read. Eric Stockton, we are told, writes novels that are of high artistic and intellectual quality but "too bleak to be popular" and somewhat lacking in "sympathy" for his fellow creatures (15). Based on such novels, Dunbar wonders "what sort of man" and "what sort of father" he would be (16). Is he too harsh on the boy and thus a cause of his delinquency?



Frances Stockton, by contrast, writes under the pen name “Marjorie Bliss,” producing romance novels that Dunbar describes in disparaging terms as “damply sentimental,” “coy and fatuous” (32). “In the literary world she was everything that Eric Stockton was not,” including popular. As another character remarks to Dunbar, “Marjorie Bliss has made Eric Stockton financially possible” (56). This information leads Dunbar to new questions about the boy’s behavior. Is Frances Stockton, the author of “sentimental” books, also a sentimental and spoiling mother? Can two authors so different possibly have a happy marriage? Is there turmoil in the household that Johnny is trying to escape? By such means, McCloy’s novel explores the complex triangular relationship between readers, books, and their corporeal authors. Dunbar’s hunches about Johnny’s behavior, however, are based on a simplistic model of authorship. Since he assumes that books reflect the true selves of their authors, he believes he can read the parents’ tendencies from their books. Meanwhile Johnny’s behavior remains as mysterious as ever.

### THE PLOT THICKENS

At this point in the novel, Dunbar reveals privately to Lord Ness the real reason for his trip to the Scottish Highlands. He has been sent by American Naval Intelligence to find a German prisoner of war who had escaped in Dalriada about a year before and is believed to be hiding out in the countryside waiting for a chance to return quietly to Germany after the war. Dunbar’s commanding officer also believes that “someone was helping this escaped prisoner or that the prisoner himself spoke English well enough to assume a Scottish or English or American identity” (106). Any strangers in the area might be the escaped prisoner or might be secretly harboring him. The two most recent arrivals, says Ness, are Maurice Charpentier, a French tutor the Stocktons have hired for Johnny, and Hugo Blaine, an American philosopher, who has been seen living in a rundown cottage deep in the nearby glen.

Since Blaine is, as mentioned above, a known proponent of Nazi ideas, Dunbar questions him closely. “I’ve read some of your books,” says Dunbar. “To the best of my recollection, you dislike nearly everybody: women, children, businessmen, scientists, the working class, Latins—in spite of your living in France and Italy—Orientals, Jews, and the colored races” (83). Far from denying these charges, Blaine merely clarifies that his objection to “modern children” stems from the “enervating maternal influence which has swelled to such fantastic proportions since the so-called emancipation of women” (83). Blaine boasts that his book on the education of boys directly influenced Hitler’s Youth Movement, which “took male children away from the suffocating feather bed of mother love and started molding them into hard, ruthless men at the age of seven or eight” (84). But Dunbar can get no confession from Blaine that he has, or would ever have, given material help to an actual Nazi escapee, so he must settle for denouncing Blaine’s authorial ethics: “All this bloodshed is born of your airy nihilism—the result of its impact, at second and third hand, . . . on starved, indisciplined minds like Hitler’s own. . . . Books like yours can do more harm than a thousand Storm Troopers” (88-89). For Dunbar, Blaine’s responsibility for Nazi atrocities is real but oblique, a function of the power of his books and ideas on certain readers “starved” for social theories that reinforce their prejudices. Blaine “merely incites others” to act while keeping his own public statements vague and abstract enough to avoid prosecution (108). Blaine thus becomes another example of “one that got away.” As Dunbar remarks, “If you call yourself a philosopher, you can get away with anything” (54).

When Dunbar learns that Johnny Stockton has been reading a book of Blaine’s he returns to Blaine’s cottage to question him again, only to find Charpentier dead along the way and Blaine, in his cottage, beaten to death with a fireplace poker. With the two main suspects for harboring the escaped German prisoner dead, Basil Willing, Dunbar’s commanding officer,

appears on the scene to interpret the clues all others have missed. Since the prisoner escaped in Dalriada on the same night of the air raid that Johnny supposedly survived, Willing concludes, he must have found Johnny and, realizing that he had a close resemblance to the boy, killed him and stolen his identity papers. Through a canny use of fluent English and information from those papers, the prisoner had been posing as the real Johnny Stockton for over a year. His repeated attempts to escape were triggered by the end of the war and the fear that he could not keep up the imposture indefinitely. He killed Charpentier because Charpentier had begun to suspect something; he killed Blaine for refusing to help him despite the pro-Nazi cast of his writings. When “Johnny” realizes that Willing has discovered his true identity, he flees on foot and falls into a chasm to his death.

The Freudian method whereby Willing reaches his conclusions is significant, both for McCloy’s novel and for Wicomb’s story. By interpreting apparently minor details of Johnny’s behavior, things he does when his attention is elsewhere—like using a Continental comma instead of a decimal point and making doodles of a chart for Ohm’s law—Willing is able to detect the German youth peeking out from behind his English mask. As in psychoanalysis, the detective’s approach is to attend to the margins of a subject’s discourse and behavior, for it is there that what his conscious self would hide will appear. In “The Moses of Michelangelo,” Freud had drawn a parallel between his method and that of art critic Giovanni Morelli, who had detected forgeries and reassigned authorship of paintings “by laying stress on the significance of minor details, of things like the drawing of the fingernails, of the lobe of an ear” (222). Likewise, says Freud, “the technique of psycho-analysis . . . is accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from despised or unnoticed features, from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations” (222).<sup>10</sup>

Willing's Freudian approach also sheds light on the relationship between authors and their texts. On the question of whether Eric Stockton, the writer of "ruthless" novels, can be trusted, Willing rejects the commonsense view of Dunbar and Lord Ness that "What a man writes must come out of himself" (149). "Yes," Willing responds, "but I'm not sure that it comes out of the self that his family and friends know. . . . Writing belongs to the dream part of the mind" (149). For Freud, both dreams and art provide a fictional space where otherwise forbidden wishes can find expression. In both, however, the more disturbing the wish, the more distorted and hidden must be the form of its representation.<sup>11</sup> "Perhaps art is really the detritus of the artist's personality," says Willing, "the crimes that weren't committed, the temptations that weren't yielded to" (149-150). Willing proposes not a direct but an inverse relation between writers and their works. Thus, "Eric Stockton should be far more kindly and considerate in real life" than his novels would suggest (150), and McCloy's plot bears this out.

Onto her story of military and ideological conflict in 1945 McCloy layers references to parallel conflicts in Scottish history between dominant and resistant groups: Jacobites and Whigs, Covenanters and Cavaliers, the matrilineal Picts and the patrilineal Scots. She evokes a landscape on the margin of England's empire, scored and criss-crossed by the physical traces of these conflicts and haunted by the ghosts of their dead. In such a landscape, historical understanding, like detection, requires attending to what lies on the margins or just beneath the surface: rubbish heaps and ruins harbor ghosts of the past. The one passage Wicomb directly quotes from the novel refers to the liminal time of *forenicht* when ghosts appear and this layering of history becomes most visible: "This is the hour we call *forenicht*, when you can see anything—ghosts of the dead and of the living, too, if you're a true Highlander" (McCloy, *The One* 16).<sup>12</sup>

## AN IMPOSTOR

Even in this brief sketch of McCloy's novel, one can see several features of interest to Zoë Wicomb. McCloy's depiction of the prisoner's ability to "pass" or impersonate another highlights identity as theatrical performance and recalls Wicomb's 2006 novel *Playing in the Light*, in which John and Helen Campbell are able to evade apartheid's system of racial classification through a sustained charade of whiteness, thus proving that system to be fallible and limited in its ability to contain South Africa's diverse population. More importantly, their experience shows that any stable identity is slippery and endlessly deferred. Their effort to cross over and to hide their coloured origins is continually threatened by the same play of signification that enables it. In Wicomb's "The One That Got Away," McCloy's novel about the slippery spy itself slips through the Cape Town library's classification system and ends up on the wrong shelf, among the books on the history of gold mining where Drew Brown is doing research for another artistic project. Drew finds the novel and saves it for a possible future project. Significantly, the mistaken filing of the novel results from an extension of apartheid logic into the supposedly objective confines of the library, and specifically the history section. Drew notices that the novel's "cloth binding was the exact green of the mining volumes" (44), so the book was judged by the color of its cover rather than by its content. The book's mis-placement thus has the nature of a Freudian slip, a small mistake that reveals the deeper truth of apartheid's obsession with skin color and its clothing of nationalist mythology in the garb of academic history. This could explain both Drew's fascination with the found book and his initial inability to explain that fascination to himself. "Only later . . . did Drew wonder why he had, without thinking, tucked the book into his folder" (45).

If Drew's McCloy project is read as an attempt to find his own place both in the factual-fictional story of South African history and in the world of art, one step toward his maturation as an artist involves reflecting on the histories he has been taught and on ways of resisting them. As Wicomb's story makes clear, Drew has had a quarrel with history all along, at least with official white history. The first use of the title phrase, "the one that got away," concerns Drew's memory of his longing to escape from Mr. Wilton's history class into another world. "Had he been an athlete he would have leapt and landed in that alien landscape: mountain ranges with high snow-capped peaks, trees burning in autumnal colours that he had seen only in pictures, colours so distant and so subtle that they had never been named. He would have been the one that got away" (38). Although he yearns for escape from "the real world" itself, the place he envisions escaping to suspiciously resembles the Europe he has seen in pictures. Wicomb thus implies that there is no alternate world he can imagine that is not shaped and colored by textuality, and specifically by the texts of Europe and its expansion. Drew must settle, then, for a more subtle artistic resistance; using colored pens he turns the pages of "Fowler & Smit," the classroom history textbook, into "dazzling" visual artworks of colored lines at all angles, "turning every printed page of Fowler & Smit into something new" (38). C. de K. Fowler and G. J. J. Smit authored multiple history textbooks in use in South African schools from 1932 onward. The edition Wicomb places in Mr. Wilton's fictional classroom was likely one of the many editions of *History for the Cape Senior Certificate and Matriculation* published by Maskew Miller, Cape Town in the twentieth century. According to Leonard Thompson, the whole series of Fowler and Smit history texts "were all based on the assumption that human races were distinct populations, each with specific and enduring cultural as well as physical characteristics, and each given a

place on a scale of civilization” (*Political* 96). In other words, they present a distorted, engineered historical vision masquerading as objective history.

Drew’s modification of this text is the work he now believes launched his career as a visual artist. His “first work of art” (38) is also a reading of the history text, for Drew’s exuberant pattern of lines creates a translucent overlay that only partly obscures the words. By this means, white history is put behind bars, as it were, but still remains legible through the gaps, as if seen through the lens of the prison system it spawned. Henceforth, this copy of Fowler and Smit must be read under erasure, rendered invalid yet not replaced with another authoritative version. This is not coloured history but white history colored, tinted, “vandalized” by the coloured artist.

#### PAY DIRT

Drew’s current project with the McCloy novel develops and expands several elements of his “Fowler & Smit” project. The secrecy he maintains (he works on it in his Glasgow hotel room while Jane, his new wife, is out) recalls not only his earlier project, completed “almost under Wilton’s nose” (38), but also Dunbar’s secret mission in McCloy’s novel. Like the “Fowler & Smit” project, Drew’s McCloy project combines text and visual art but also moves beyond these to a consideration of context and “installation.” Having brought McCloy’s novel with him to Glasgow on his honeymoon, Drew makes two physical alterations to the book. He scrapes off the title painted on the spine, leaving the embossed lettering visible, and paints the green cover red. Then on the cover and on a new title page, he prints a new title and author: “*Gold Mining on the Rand: 1886-1899 by Gavin Wilton*. He chuckles at the thought of old Wilton finding his name attached to a novel” (48). Secretly, he takes the altered novel to the Dennistoun library and slips it into the fiction section “between Wickham and Whitworth”—as Carli Coetzee points out, this is exactly where both Wilton and Zoë Wicomb’s *The One That Got*

*Away* would be filed (Coetzee 568). In Drew's latest artistic installation, then, Wilton's white patriarchal version of history has changed from contents to casing, from the text seen through a veil to the veil itself. What lies inside now is a woman's critique of white patriarchy as incarnated in Nazi ideology. The ironic relationship between object and setting stages the cultural resistance Wicomb had discussed in her essay. The imaginative reader might also notice that when Wicomb's 2008 book is filed there (the one *we* hold in *our* hands), two books of the same title will stand side by side on the shelf (both with red covers, by the way), like mirror images. Because of Drew's work, however, it is McCloy's earlier book that will appear as the ghostly reflection rather than the "true origin" of Wicomb's. McCloy's book about the value of mothering and the costs of denying this value both is and is not the "mother" of Wicomb's book.<sup>13</sup> This mirroring can also be read as a figure for the complexity of intertextual reference in literature and for the troubled nature of referentiality in language itself, which must always pass through the filter of history and culture.

By using Wilton's name and assigning the title *Gold Mining on the Rand: 1886-1899* Drew accomplishes several things. Since Drew knew Wilton the man, this move sets up a new triangular relationship between Drew, Wilton, and Wilton's specular work. The title indicates the sort of work Drew thinks Wilton would write (dry, historical), recalling the judgments Dunbar and others within McCloy's work make about the relation of authors to their texts. The title also marks McCloy's novel, at the very moment of its return to the "library from which it was borrowed" (45), as a foreigner still. Not only is it out of place in the alphabetical order of author names, but its cover now hints playfully at where it has been since 1976: in the gold mining section of the Cape Town library. The "scars of its journey" can be read as a story stitching South Africa and Glasgow together, part of a larger historical narrative that is in part about gold.



The section in the Fowler and Smit textbook that most closely corresponds to Drew's new title, "The Gold Industry on the Witwatersrand," states the importance of the MacArthur-Forrest Cyanide process, another Glasgow connection, to the developing South African gold industry (*History* 376). In 1887 two doctors, Robert and William Forrest, and a chemist, John S. MacArthur, working in Glasgow, patented a process for removing gold from conglomerate ore using cyanidation (Scheidel 12-13). The MacArthur-Forrest Process was first used on the Rand in 1890, when MacArthur himself went to South Africa to supervise the first industrial-scale demonstration (Fivaz 312). As numerous historians have noted, it was this process, coupled with low-wage black labor, that made mining of the relatively low-grade ore on the Rand economically feasible (Fivaz 313; Thompson, *History* 120). The system of migrant black labor developed on the mines in the 1880s—with black workers confined in residential compounds and restricted from skilled and supervisory roles—became the model for black labor throughout the country under apartheid (Thompson, *History* 112-120). In addition, MacArthur-Forrest Process itself, in which gold is first dissolved in cyanide solution and then precipitated from the solution, may be seen as a chemical equivalent of the separating and sorting process of apartheid, in which a supposedly "pure" Afrikaner "race" is artificially separated out from its "natural" surroundings. Drew's art work, then, seems designed, at the least, to raise questions about Scottish accountability for the uses made of its inventions, another version of the question of authorial responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

### A SOLDIER'S TALE

"Infiltration" is an apt term for Drew's surreptitious art project, which he keeps secret from his spouse and from the Dennistoun Library staff. "Guerilla art" is a term the contemporary art world uses for similar phenomena that have become more widespread in recent decades,

projects that use the “guerilla” techniques of secrecy and anonymity to stage forms of artistic and ideological resistance.<sup>15</sup> Guerilla art challenges not only particular works but also the dominant conventions of space and authorship that organize the professional art world. Both terms call to mind the final alteration to McCloy’s text I would like to discuss, one made not by Drew but by Wicomb. When Drew finds the book, “the last date stamped in the final column of the lending sheet was 16 JUN 1976” (44), a date that for many in South Africa marked the beginning of the end of apartheid.<sup>16</sup> Student protests beginning in Soweto, a black township of Johannesburg, were ruthlessly suppressed by police, sparking a wave of protests, further shootings, and arrests that by the end of 1976 had spread throughout the country.

Why would Wicomb want to associate McCloy’s novel of World War II with the Soweto uprising? McCloy’s book is about young soldiers in particular, children removed from their mothers and “fathered” into a dominant culture that is sexist, racist, and heavily militarized. As McCloy tells it, they emerge from Hitler Youth training as adolescents totally believing in the cause for which they are ready to kill. The title, *The One That Got Away*, refers first of all to the escaped Nazi youth who survives the war and lives undetected among the Allies before finally tipping his hand. Metaphorically, he is a figure for Nazi or fascist ideas that circulate in Western society generally, dressed in the garb of highbrow philosophy, traditionalist history, and other forms that live before and after the military defeat of the Nazi regime. No doubt one of the satisfactions McCloy’s novel supplied to its English-language readers in 1945 was the spectacle of seeing one of the “fathers” of such ideas (in this case the woman-hating philosopher Hugo Blaine) bludgeoned to death by one of his own ideological offspring. As Basil Willing puts it, “Blaine was destroyed by one of the instruments he had helped to forge” (191). Both Blaine and the prisoner are eventually caught in the net of their own intolerance. But although McCloy’s

book functions on one level as a triumphalist American denunciation of Nazism, it also figures the failure of any final victory. What continues to get away, what can't be so easily controlled, is the spread of ideas of racial purity, male power, and military dominance, the building blocks of every new totalitarian regime, lying like seeds in the underground of an ostensibly "liberal" culture. As Dunbar says of Blaine's ideas: "[Since] we're committed to free speech, there's nothing we can do about them. They will flourish like the green bay tree until the end of time" (114). Here the very commitment to freedom and democracy that defines the Allies' superiority over fascism also allows for fascism's continuing survival in the marketplace of ideas. Censorship *of* fascist ideas would only produce a new fascism, so the refusal of censorship entails an ongoing ideological struggle that muddies the detective novel's generic closure, in which reason is supposed to triumph over hatred and secrecy.

By attaching the date of the 1976 Soweto uprising to McCloy's book, Wicomb allows it to gesture toward the very question she had placed at the heart of her 2001 novel, *David's Story*, the question of whether *any* militarism can successfully defend the freedoms it is meant to secure, particularly freedoms for women.<sup>17</sup> In *David's Story*, David and the narrator debate whether the Soweto uprising should be understood as a "spontaneous rebellion" of freedom-loving adolescents or as an act of military obedience "orchestrated" from behind by the ANC's military organization (79). The narrator worries that there may be an inherent contradiction between "military values and the goal of political freedom" (79), and she asks David whether, in the "New South Africa militarized men and women will enter civic positions without declaring themselves as the military" (79). Like "play whites," such people would have an ironic relation to their surroundings, outwardly appearing to fit into the envelope of the "new" civilian society, but carrying their military enculturation with them, their commitment to "protocol and

hierarchy,” “saluting and standing to attention” (79), hidden from others and perhaps even from themselves. Wicomb has no easy solution to this problem, but she insists frequently that it is one that needs to be discussed. Although McCloy’s novel is more liberal than radical in its politics, reading this novel of Scotland through the lens of Soweto may highlight what Wicomb called in a 2010 interview “the horror of taking up arms and the irony of adopting military values.”<sup>18</sup>

#### TO MEET YOUR MAKER

The final section of Wicomb’s story creates the illusion of a conversation between Wicomb herself and Drew, her fictional character. Although Wicomb had earlier hinted at her presence within the fictional frame of the story with a single first-person pronoun (see page 41), now her spatial and temporal deixis become unmistakable, a gesture that recalls the “authorial foregrounding of her own subjectivity and of the ethics of representing her people” that Wicomb had praised in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (“Setting” 151). “We sit in the twilight, the hour of forenicht, on the stoep looking out at Table Mountain on fire. . . . When the others go in to get drinks I ask Drew what he thinks” (49). The setting here seems to be an evening gathering or cocktail party. Wicomb’s fictional persona (let’s call her “Wicomb”) has shown Drew a copy of the story we have been reading of Drew’s honeymoon trip and his secret McCloy project; Drew returns the manuscript and the two briefly discuss his response. “It’s okay, he says, even if it’s hardly a subject for a story. Really, it was just idle chat, just another event amongst things that happened on the honeymoon” (49). “Wicomb” is clearly stung by this tepid reception. “It is difficult not to be offended,” she confides to us, then replies defensively to Drew: “Well, it’s obviously not about you, or the two of you; it’s just that I used your project – as one does, I add lamely. I just thought you’d find it amusing to see what I came up with” (49). The evident tension between them stems from their differing perceptions of Drew’s art project in relation to

the whole trip. What for him was marginal, “just idle chat,” something “not meant to be weighty” (50), she has turned into the center of “an elaborate story” (49). Interestingly, her response to Drew’s challenge both defends her freedom to “use” Drew as intertextual material the way he has used McCloy and repeats his gesture of nonchalance in relation to her own work; her intent, she claims, was merely to “amuse” him, although we may suspect she is dissembling.

This confrontation between author and character reenacts, with variations, the climactic scene of McCloy’s novel. As we have seen, the novel is structured as a series of encounters between readers and authors revolving around the question of the author’s relation to, and responsibility for, his works. According to Basil Willing’s recreation of the crime, the murder of Hugo Blaine by “Johnny Stockton” (his German name is never given in the text) is more than a confrontation of author and disgruntled reader, for the boy had been “trained according to Blaine’s own ideas” (190) and recognized Blaine as “an intellectual father of the Nazi movement” (189). In an important sense, then, “Johnny” is like a character written by Blaine and sprung to corporeal life before his eyes. “Can you imagine the irony of the dreadful scene that followed?” remarks Willing as he pieces together the story of what must have happened in Blaine’s cottage that night. Blaine’s refusal to provide material help to the escapee “was heresy to a religion and treason to a cause. . . . To Johnny, it was an appalling discovery that the creed he took so seriously had never been anything more than a literary plaything to Blaine.” (191). Blaine had written his books, “Johnny” discovers, not sincerely but “idly and contemptuously as a kind of intellectual pastime” (191). Thus “Johnny’s” motive for murder was not just contempt for Blaine’s cowardice or anger at being refused, but rage at the mismatch between the man and the book. As a naïve reader, “Johnny” expects that the author of such strong patriarchal and militaristic ideas must be a man of courage and principle. Instead, he finds Blaine to be cynical

and cowardly, his writing a mere pose, and the irony is heightened by the fact that “Johnny” is himself a consummate impostor. What “Johnny” cannot fathom is the inverse relation between author and work that Willing had promoted earlier; as with Eric Stockton, Blaine’s books represent not his social self but his repressed self, a man he could never allow himself to be in public. “Johnny’s” violent attack marks the moment at which Blaine is made, against his will, to answer for his writings. Prior to this, as Willing says, “Blaine rather prided himself on having escaped all the personal consequences of his own ideas” (190). His death gives material force to Dunbar’s earlier denouncement of him as an “inciter” of violent behavior in others and completes the chain of causality that leads from his writing to the real world. By dabbling in fascist ideology, Blaine had been playing with fire.

Wicomb’s final scene not only repeats McCloy’s structure but doubles it. Just as Drew is presented as the author of the McCloy project of which “Wicomb” is a reader, so “Wicomb” is the author of the short story about Drew’s project, of which he is now a reader. It’s no wonder that Drew comments, “All Chinese boxes hey, where will it all end” (50).<sup>19</sup> “Wicomb’s” discovery that she has taken seriously a work that for Drew was “just idle chat” mirrors “Johnny’s” discovery of Blaine’s casual authorship, but without the high stakes or the resort to violence. In fact, Wicomb’s version of this confrontation between author and creation seems to welcome the very accountability that Hugo Blaine had shunned. Whereas Blaine feels no responsibility for his writings and their consequences, “Wicomb” has deliberately sought out Drew’s opinion of her work and written his objections into her story, portraying herself in the text as emotionally vulnerable to his critiques. When she registers surprise, for example, that Drew returns the manuscript to her (“I had imagined that he would keep it” [49]), she implies that the story has in some ways escaped her authorial control: her own story is not turning out the

way she “imagined” it would. This can be read as a fictional staging of a voluntary self-limitation on her power as author. Her story is more than a simple misreading of Drew, however. By placing Drew’s “modest little project” (49) at the center of her story, “Wicomb” has also put herself in the role of Freudian analyst in relation to Drew, potentially revealing things about him and his work that he cannot himself see. This is especially true in the case of McCloy’s novel. Since, as Wicomb tells us, Drew did not read the book carefully before using it for his art project, he is not in a position to say in detail how it, and his modifications of it, might reflect on his own situation or on South Africa’s history. As I hope I have shown, however, Zoë Wicomb has read McCloy’s novel carefully and has built from it an intertextual edifice of quite stunning complexity. Although she is in a position to see different meanings in Drew’s work, however, she insists that hers is not a “theological” position of omniscience. Her final gesture in the story is to imagine a space in which her interpretation meets his on equal footing.

Given Wicomb’s comments in her essay about the “ready-made” meanings available through setting (“Setting” 146), we may well ask what ready-made meanings she hoped to access through the setting of this final scene. From the stoep where they sit they can see “Table Mountain on fire. Tonight’s news says that a British tourist has set it alight with his cigarette” (49). This detail gives the scene a specific spatio-temporal setting sometime between the 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of January, 2006, when a fire started by British tourist Anthony Cooper killed one woman and burned for three days before being brought under control (“Briton”). At Cooper’s trial in 2008 on charges of arson and culpable homicide, witnesses said they saw Cooper flick a cigarette butt from his hand while Cooper maintained that the fire was caused by a spark from his match that accidentally flew out his car window. According to the *Mail & Guardian*, Magistrate Wilma van der Merwe, who presided at the trial, did not believe Cooper’s version of events but found

enough reasonable doubt in the prosecution's case that she was obliged to acquit him ("Accused").

It is a flare from this fire, says Wicomb, that "lights both our faces" (50) in the story's final line, but what light exactly does it shed on the story itself? The incident sounds several themes we have seen at work in Wicomb's story and its intertextual weavings. Investigation of the Table Mountain fire as a potential crime led to the arrest of Anthony Cooper and the building of a legal case against him. Although Cooper's trial still lies in the future as Drew and "Wicomb" are talking on the stoep, Cooper seems to be another example of "one that got away," thus returning us to the story's title and its many referents. Is Cooper meant to parallel McCloy's Hugo Blaine in his casual tossing out of incendiary material (literal in one case, ideological in the other) and his attempts to avoid responsibility for its effects? Or is Wicomb drawing our attention to the very undecidability of the question of responsibility? Because Cooper's trial staged a contest of differing interpretations with inconclusive results (not unlike that of Drew and "Wicomb" in this scene), we cannot say that he "got away" with a crime; rather, it seems that certainty itself slips away from the interpretive process (see McCann 65). Finally, Wicomb's reference to Cooper and the Table Mountain fire gives us another perspective on travel and translation between South Africa and the United Kingdom. As a self-described "tourist," Cooper stands metonymically for a larger population of Britons who "get away" to Cape Town every year in a commerce that both sustains the economy of the "new" South Africa and remains inextricably connected to its history of colonization.

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## NOTES

1. Published articles that discuss the title story, “The One that Got Away,” in some detail include those by Driver, Coetzee, Greim, and Gurnah. Several other articles and reviews discuss the collection but make only passing reference to the title story.
2. Later in her important essay on Wicomb, Driver elaborates: “Turning the familiar into the strange, the homely into the unhomely, the real into the discursive—these are the strategies of a writer who recognizes the arbitrary nature of the sign, the political importance of not submitting to representation as if it were the real, and the need for the reader’s creative, self-conscious, participatory role in the production of meaning” (“Struggle” 537).
3. See, for example, Richard D. Brecht, who writes of deixis: “This class of grammatical elements is distinguished by the fact that the complete and explicit semantic interpretation must include a reference to some point of orientation in the context” (491). For another work in which Wicomb discusses deixis and its ideological implications, see “Motherhood and the Surrogate Reader: Race, Gender, and Interpretation.”
4. In this essay I have chosen to focus only on the intertextual relations between McCloy’s novel and the one story that shares its title. Since McCloy’s title is, by Wicomb’s choice, transferred to the entire book, however, the potential for intertextual connections with the other stories in the collection remains to be explored.
5. See, for example, the art reviews published by McCloy in *Parnassus* in 1934 and 1935.
6. The most extensive print sources on McCloy’s biography are those by Gorman, Papinchak, and Joyner. There are also numerous online resources devoted to McCloy and her works. Most of the online biographies rely on the print sources mentioned above, but extensive critical assessments of her work can be found that have no print equivalents, most notably the web page by Michael E. Grost.
7. The anti-feminist character of Nazi ideology had been recognized in the United States press as early as the 1930s. See, for example, the essays by Frieda Wunderlich published in *Social Research* (1937) and *The American Scholar* (1938) and the later work of scholar Claudia Koonz.
8. Clues within the novel suggest that Dalriada is McCloy’s fictional version of Glasgow; it is a port city and locale of an important naval base, for example, and the sea lies to its west. McCloy also seems to have chosen the fictional name as a reference to ancient Scottish history. The Dal Riada were a Gaelic-speaking people with roots in northeastern Ireland and western Scotland who clashed with the occupying Romans (who called them “Scotti”) in the third century and later united with the Picts in 844 (Snow 46).
9. Freud’s famous principle that the process of psychic repression can never be complete accounts for the combination of conscious and unconscious material in our outward words and actions. Since the unconscious material will always be relegated to the margins or minor details, astute interpretation involves reversing the center/margin or major/minor hierarchy. What escapes the attention of the subject becomes the main focus of attention for the analyst. The “offhand” becomes the legible handwriting of another self or intention all but hidden from view. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud

elaborates on the spatial metaphor of center and margin: “The dream is, as it were, differently centred from the dream-thoughts—its content has different elements as its central point” (340). He also accounts for the inability of the ego or conscious self to exercise complete control over all behaviors: “becoming conscious is connected with the application of a particular psychical function, that of attention—a function which, as it seems, is only available in a specific quantity” (632). See also Peter Galison, who connects Freud’s theories of psychic censorship to his experience of postal censorship during World War I and to communication by allusion or intertextuality.

10. See, for example, Freud, “The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming” and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 174-179.
11. For a further discussion of ghosts, haunting, and the uncanny in Wicomb’s recent work, see Richter.
12. Carli Coetzee discusses in detail Wicomb’s use of—and suspicion of—genealogies and origins in *David’s Story*. Notice also the role that Jane’s view of mothers and motherhood plays in Wicomb’s story.
13. Recall also that Drew’s initial fascination with the book hinges in part on the question of responsibility posed by the “injunction” on the lending sheet: “The text speaks to him: responsibility for returning the book does not remain with the one who borrowed it” (45-46).
14. Notable practitioners of guerilla art include the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous collective of feminist artists who began placing challenging works in public spaces in 1985 in New York (Smith; Withers), and Banksy, an anonymous graffiti artist whose works began to appear in Bristol, UK, in 1993 (Collins).
15. A character in Wicomb’s novel *David’s Story* refers to June 16 as the “birthday of freedom” (206).
16. See Meg Samuelson’s insightful and well-researched “The Disfigured Body of the Female Guerrilla” for a more detailed discussion of militarism and gender in *David’s Story*.
17. See Ewald Mengel’s “Washing Dirty Linen in Public – An Interview with Zoë Wicomb” (22) and Wicomb’s interview with Hein Willemse (151-152). As early as 1994 Wicomb had posed the question, “How will military values acquired during the struggle be converted to civic values and why does no one address this crucial aspect of reconstruction?” (“Comment” 576).
18. Or, to put it differently, Drew’s project is a fictional art work that makes use of a real novel; Wicomb’s story is a real art work that makes use of Drew’s fictional art work that makes use of a real novel.

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